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I describe the process of becoming a feminist as a bumpy process.

Sara Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

## 1. A challenge of teaching feminism

As teachers of feminism, an obvious aim is to convey to students feminist challenges to patriarchy, and the hegemonic status quo. For anyone who has taught feminism, teaching these challenges becomes a challenge for teaching itself. It is not merely that feminism is as complex, diverse and intellectually challenging as any other difficult area of study – which it is – it is the fact that feminism is challenging. It is a challenge to students, to how they think, to how they learn, as much as what it is they learn. The intimacy of this challenge might be unique in a student's experience. For some it is a revelation: it is the first time that their education speaks to, and about, them. For most people they find themselves implicated, in some way or other, in the challenges they are learning about: learning feminism can be a difficult, transformative experience which requires that students make themselves vulnerable. This is hard for students and teachers alike; it is also something that makes teaching and learning about feminism a rewarding performance of its own challenging praxis.

But for some students, learning about feminism can be a confounding, confusing and hostile experience. While likely true, it is too quick and obvious to point out that this is because the student is, in some way or other, committed against feminism. After all, one can learn something and yet disagree with it. What I want to explore in this article is how the content, and the form of that content, of feminist theory makes it difficult to even learn – especially for those students already hostile to it. In this article, I want to unpick two related ways that feminist theories, and the claims they generate, put pressure on the familiar frames of understanding that educational epistemology standardly coordinates itself around. Where feminist theory makes critical claims about the world, it challenges familiar norms that govern descriptive theory claims. Such critical claims effectively describe the world in ways that challenge standard ideas of description as such. This challenge is passed on to the student: critical feminist claims can be very difficult for the student to understand as intelligible claims, given standard epistemic and descriptive norms. In the second part of the article, I extend this analysis by exploring how feminist claims often destabilise the very possibility of hegemonic knowledge. Using a Wittgensteinian account of 'certainty' helps us to see that feminist claims can clash with students' sense of self and world. In my experience, this clash can often be felt as an immanent dissonance in students' learning experience.

I think these particular pressures might be especially acute in the educational context in which I work which is primarily an analytic philosophy department. Indeed, I think that a consequence of my analysis for teaching and curriculum design is a caution against tokenism. It is easy to see learning as formally homogenous, with courses and course content being hot-pluggable: a course can be dropped, and a feminist course slotted into a curriculum. This is generally how students' own demands for better diversity are often met. However, I think that this overlooks the ways that critical feminist theories may be anathema to other parts of a curriculum. That is not to suggest, of course, that we should not teach feminism – indeed, perhaps so much the worse for these other modules. What

we cannot expect, however, is that feminism will just ‘play nicely’! Nor that it is immune from the pressures of its educational context. The ways in which feminism may clash with other aspects of a curriculum need recognising and teaching within the classroom. Otherwise, students might find dissonance in their learning experience, but have no way to address and work with it. Moreover, I think being aware of the pressures I highlight in this article will help teachers of feminism to articulate its oppositionality in hegemonic educational contexts.

### 1.1. Two theories . . . worlds apart

To see how these pressures arise, let us first take Finlayson’s programmatic claim concerning the importance of ‘ideology-critique’ to feminism:

The main task of feminist political philosophy is often construed as the task of working out what perfect gender justice requires . . . But [such] endeavours are blind without some form of feminist ideology-critique: in order to have any real idea of what ‘gender justice’ might be, we have to understand and see through the distortions of thought surrounding ideas of gender, distortions which have long served to uphold gender injustice and oppression; and in order to have any clue how to realise a society that better lives up to feminist ideals, we have to have some idea of how to respond to the forms of thought that impede our progress. (Finlayson 2016, 22)

To the extent that this is right – and I think it is – ideology-critique must form part of an education about feminist philosophy: students must learn to be critical of dominant modes of sociocultural ideology, and they must learn to see, and see through, the distorted self re-presentations of sociocultural ideology through which hegemony simultaneously fantasises itself, and hides behind. It is precisely the issues of distortion, and the demands it places on the student, which concern us here.

To set the issue in relief, consider an anecdotal example from my teaching experience. An obvious standard of feminist philosophy concerns theorising the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, and what their relationship might be. Teaching this material from some kind of ‘critical’ point of view prompts responses that range from ‘obviously . . .’, to personal epiphany, to a bewilderment that borders on outright hostility.<sup>2</sup> I do not need to explain the myriad positions involved in teaching these debates. Nevertheless, take Butler’s position in *Gender Trouble* (2006) – clearly a critical view in the relevant sense, and a position that surely anyone should at least teach regardless of whether or not they agree or disagree. Some students ‘get it’ very quickly – some of those students like the view; some do not. What is distinctive, in my teaching experience at least, is how students either fail to understand the view or are profoundly hostile to it. Of course, maybe I just teach feminism badly; I very much hope that this is not the case! Regardless, the standard methods that I employ to motivate, explain and argue for a view – argue to the extent that sceptical students can see it as a *prima facie* tenable position – are disproportionately ineffective compared to the teaching of other subjects. To put it another way, why are some of my sceptical students more happy to entertain Lewis’ view that we should be modal realists – a view that even he admitted is *prima facie* bizarre – but not that ‘gender’ is normatively prior to ‘sex’?<sup>3</sup> It is worth briefly surveying some theory details to see just how surprising this is. And moreover, because it is in some of the details that the anecdote is instructive.

When teaching modal realism to students, what do I want them to entertain as tenable? In effect, it is a number of claims, or propositions, that the view consists in – arguments and justification aside. These include the following strange metaphysical claims: that

- ☐ reality is infinitely more preponderant than what is actually possible;
- ☐ actuality is just one, and only one, possible way everything could be;
- ☐ reality consists in every possibility;
- ☐ possible things do not actually exist, but are yet still real.

When I teach students modal realism, I assume two things: that these are obviously baffling things to believe and that it is by no means obvious why anyone would be motivated to think this. How and why should anyone believe something so baroque? I expect teaching this theory to be an uphill struggle. Lewis himself, the originator of the view in its modern form,<sup>4</sup> admits it is met with incredulous stares. What always strikes me about the claims of modal realism is how much easier they are to say than to imagine. Only when this dizzying infinity is tamed and commodified through the familiar currency of propositions, rendered homely and transparent in the dream of a priori reasoning, is it possible to even think, let alone believe. Despite its strangeness, possible world semantics and logic – if not full-blown modal realism – constitute the philosophical frame for many analytic philosophers; it spreads itself over epistemology, moral discourse, counterfactual reasoning in political and historical theory, natural laws and natural kinds, to name but a few areas. In other words, this modal world view nests the student experience of many philosophy students in Anglophone philosophy departments.<sup>5</sup> Why is it so compelling? Lewis is honest: it is so theoretically useful within an analytic philosophical context. So much about the tolerability of strangeness depends on how much one shares a similar view of the problem at hand. If a student has been taught to see problems as analytical issues of logical and semantic clarification and transparency, certain kinds of strangeness are more easily bracketed.

Anyway, this article is not about modal realism, nor about whether or not it is a good theory. But against all that, for some students at least, Judith Butler's theory of gender – a theory which is after all, at least about the world we actually live in – is a step too far. The situation is stark: the proposition it is possible that I may have had a head made of tomatoes because a counterpart of me in a 'distant world' has a head made of tomatoes is a sensical locution worth arguing over; but the claim that 'gender' is normatively prior to 'sex' is variously 'esoteric', 'obviously false', 'nonsense', 'stupid', 'ideology', and/or just 'anti-scientific'. When there is rejection of either theory, it is often invective that is dished out on Butler, and disagreement, no matter how emphatic, that is reserved for

Lewis.

## 2. A culture of propositions and how claims claim

You become conscious over time of how things are not what they seem . . . . Sara Ahmed

I do not believe that these differing responses are insignificant, nor mere accidents of student reception and experience. There are many reasons why students are resistant to some theories and not others – not least because certain views put pressure on students' implicit or explicit sociopolitical and cultural commitments. The following analysis is not intended as any kind of sufficient explanation of the problems that face the teaching of feminist theory. Rather, this is an exploration of a nexus of issues involving theoretical claims: how they describe the world; how they participate in issues of epistemology, and justification; the existential pressures they exert; and how all of this becomes a problem for teaching within certain cultural and educational contexts.

To that end, I explore two related ideas: how the claims of critical feminism challenge the way that theories claim, easily confounding student understanding and expectations; secondly, that feminist claims challenge the certainties which constitute the forms of life within which students make sense of themselves and the world around them. So, while Lewis' theoretical claims are strange, the way that they behave as claims is very standard. By contrast, the criticality of feminist theory results in claims that describe the world in ways that challenge the everyday norms of description. The result can be student confusion. Secondly, Lewis' modal realism outsources all its strangeness to the realm of a priori abstraction – where weird things happen anyway! It leaves the actual world pretty much as it is. Actual (sociocultural) reality is not, in principle, any distorted or stranger than it appears. By contrast, the criticality of feminist theory transforms the lived world in which students make sense of themselves, and the world around them. It critiques the appearances of the everyday world as distorted functions of hegemonic ideology. Learning feminism theory involves a level of existential jeopardy which is immediately felt in student experience. The result can be student hostility.

To explore how it is that feminist claims might be challenging in ways that even the most outlandish claims of analytic metaphysics are not, the discussion needs situating in a theoretical and educational context. What are the contexts of which Lewis and Butler are exemplar? On the one hand, these very different theories share at least one important feature: they are both making claims about the world – no matter how different. However, as suggested above, they claim in very different ways. I want to focus on the critical norms upon which feminist claims operate; this, I believe, is a significant part of the puzzle as to why teaching feminism can be so difficult. However, this is not to suggest that feminism is in some way intrinsically challenging to teach. Rather, it is a result of a clash between, on the one hand, how it is that critical claims both describe and challenge hegemonic representations of the sociocultural world and, on the other, the misreading/ misunderstanding of these critical norms in an educational context which generally treats theory claims in a very different way to feminism.

## 2.1. Standpoint epistemology, feminist pedagogy and teaching feminism

To build my argument, it is useful to see how the issue at hand is distinctive in feminist work on pedagogy and epistemology. It is obvious and well known that any critical feminism must challenge hegemonic practices in both knowledge-making and education. Challenges in each of these domains are at least related to the extent that education concerns knowledge. On the one hand, perhaps the most important feminist challenges to hegemonic knowledge-making practices come through standpoint epistemology. Thanks to work by the likes of Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock, the idea that knowledge is politically neutral, equally available to all, can be equally generated by anyone, and is 'objective' is now seen as dubious at best.<sup>6</sup> What is excluded and included as knowledge, who, and on what basis, are admitted as epistemic agents, have all been systematically distorted under the racist, classist, sexist, hegemonic regimes of discourse and power.

Standpoint epistemology has, in various complex ways, sought to destabilise the dominance of the 'Western', White, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual man as the model of epistemic agency par excellence. This supposedly ideal, and idealised, 'knower' who has been taken implicitly or explicitly as the exemplar epistemic agent precisely because of his 'advantages' – he is 'well-educated', 'fair', 'just', 'rational', 'civilised' and so on – has been thoroughly critiqued. The standpoint claim is not only that this model is a symptom of the very sociocultural hegemony we should be resisting, it is simply false. It is, for example, false to say that White men are best placed, even equally placed, to understand racism as those who are the racialised subjects of a racist hegemony.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, to put the point somewhat simply, the very people who have been excluded from hegemonic knowledge-making practices are the very people who understand and know its problems best.

A further significant thread of standpoint epistemology is the destabilisation of certain modes and media of knowledge; chief among them is propositional knowledge, its techniques and methods of knowledge production. Propositional knowledge is formally ill-equipped for generating and communicating vast swathes of knowledge – 'know-how' being the obvious example. Moreover, propositional knowledge tends to favour sociocultural activities reserved for men, and various extensions of patriarchal culture. By contrast, 'knowing how', as a modality of knowledge-making germane to areas determined as 'feminine', has been marginalised. As such, alternative modalities of epistemology are vital to the expression, exploration and transference of counter-hegemonic knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

In light of the above brief gloss, it is clear that standpoint epistemology is a crucial force in thinking through what a feminist critical pedagogy might look like.<sup>9</sup> In rethinking the form, content and bearers of knowledge, education, as a key medium for the transference and communication of knowledge, must be transformed. Driven by the commitments of standpoint epistemology, feminist pedagogies are concerned with the problematics of decolonising curricula, reconfiguring the textual canon to remove and/or displace hegemonic voices, and to make space for marginalised communities: queer voices, women of colour, the subaltern.<sup>10</sup> In short, what students will be taught, and what a

feminist education looks like, will be transformed by counter-hegemonic knowledge. This will have an effect in classroom structure, politics and performance: those students who have been marginalised are more likely to understand, and have deeper insight into the material, than their more socioculturally privileged colleagues.

This latter experience can be somewhat surprising in its own right as some of my students have found out. While the men who have taken my gender module have been generally respectful, more than one has pointed out that they feel perturbed that 'they don't seem to be able to participate in the same way as some of the other students'. This was put down to the module covering 'emotive' issues. I was understanding, but my response was to rerun through some of the basics of standpoint epistemology. Furthermore, apart from objecting to the partitioning off of gender as an 'emotive' domain, and explaining the problems of this, I also pointed out that feminism produces claims as much as any other discipline – if that is what the student is looking for. Moreover, these claims are not emotional outbursts, but attempts to capture critical, counter-hegemonic descriptions of how the world is. And this is the crucial point for my discussion.

Something that many of my students struggled with was Monique Wittig's famous counter-hegemonic claim: lesbians are not women (1992, 32). In the epistemological register, this is clearly in line with the standpoint claim that sociocultural positionality affords epistemic insight. Being a lesbian, Wittig understood that hegemonic discourse concerning 'women' aggressively excludes her: she is not what is intended by talk of 'women'. Her claim articulates this exclusion. But it does much more, because, in some obvious sense, lesbians are women. One thing that hegemonic, heteronormative discourse about women does is normatively exclude lesbians, while analytically including them. Hence lesbian identity has nowhere to go to make itself visible: it is analytically sucked into hegemonic discourse while normatively tabooed within it. The consequence is erasure. Hence her claim not only articulates the actual marginalised situation of lesbians vis-a'-vis hegemonic 'women'-talk, it defiantly refuses analytic reassimilation. This establishes the lesbian as her own subject, and also her oppositional situation vis-a'-vis hegemonic heteronormativity.

Whatever one makes of Wittig's claim, I think something very telling happened in its reception when I was teaching the claim. I could explain to students all of the above, and the students then had a way to parse 'what is meant' by Wittig's claim. But, for some, to maintain their understanding, they had to detach this 'what is meant' from the pressure of the claim describing the world. It seemed to me that the claim was often taken in some kind of figurative sense, not the descriptive sense of saying how the world is. Why? Because, 'at the end of the day', 'lesbians are not women' is just obviously false. In Hale's article for *Hypatia* on Wittig's claim, it is telling that he cites a student making exactly this point: surely if lesbians are anything, they are women (1996, 94–95). It is interesting that the student responds to Wittig's claim as if this standard view had passed her by! It shows an amazing lack of credit for her intelligence. But what students seem to be struggling with, understandably I might say, is that a claim might actually be aiming to describe the world, but in a way very different to the ways that claims are normally understood.

If I say that ‘there is a table in the room’, there had better be a table in the room. If I say there is a lesbian in the room, I had better think there is also a woman in the room. These are the normal, pre-theoretical, commonsensical ways we think about claims. But remember, as Finlayson says, feminism is charged with seeing through the distortions of hegemonic ideology.<sup>11</sup> What students have to do to grasp a critical theoretical claim, if they do not already see the distortions of hegemony, is to perform a profound act of political imagination<sup>12</sup>: they have to see that a counter-hegemonic claim describes a way sociocultural reality is, not merely beyond how it appears, but in such a way that its manifest image turns out to be false and ideological. Simultaneously, it requires the student to see how the actual fabric of sociocultural reality might be otherwise than it appears under hegemonic configurations – and by implication that it could be otherwise still!

The issue here is not straightforwardly a point of standpoint epistemology, nor of developing a model of feminist pedagogy – although I hope that what I say here is useful in both of these domains, and obviously related to them. While these domains are vital for helping us with what to teach, how and why understanding might distribute in the classroom, how to coordinate the classroom as a political space, there is a crucial problem left over. When teaching feminist theories, how do we do that when their claims challenge the norms that standardly coordinate claiming as such? It is quite clear that Wittig’s provocation is itself a moment of political resistance to the very norms of claiming: she knows what she is saying seems obviously false; that is part of what is at stake in the politics of the claim. Given the sorts of experiences I outline in this article, I am coming to believe that this is something we need to engage with when teaching feminism – especially for students who do not ‘see’ the problem as it were. That is not to suggest that teaching feminism collapses into the discussion of claims. However, to the extent that feminist theorists make critical claims about social, cultural, political, historical states of affairs, this problematic concerning the normativity of claiming is a problem of teaching feminism that I do not see a way around.

Wittig’s claim is a kind of description: it talks about the world. But this is a critical description, as discussed, mobilised with deep oppositional force to how one might ordinarily/hegemonically describe the world. One thing she is doing with her claim is making explicit the contingency of the image of sociocultural, political reality, demonstrating that reality is at odds with itself, and available for reconfiguration. Those of my students who understand the claim in something like a figurative sense want to understand ‘the point’ while leaving the sociocultural world as it actually is. The claim is figuratively true/interesting/plausible/insightful, but still descriptively false because, just as accurate claims about tables will necessarily pick out a table, accurate claims about lesbians pick out women. It is this norm of manifestly accurate description which standardly configures the normative intelligibility of a good claim: true/good/accurate (choose your idiom of evaluation) claims describe how things do indeed appear; not in ways that they do not appear. What is clear, however, is that the oppositional force arises out of a clash with other normative contexts. As such, I now want to consider a little of the educational environment in which I teach, and which contributes to the difficulties some students find in engaging with critical feminism.



## 2.2. Teaching feminism in a context

Whenever I teach possible worlds, in order to mitigate its strangeness, I actually draw upon the descriptive practices that critical feminism resists. So, when I say something true, it represents how things actually appear to be. I do it in the following way, and it is very successful. I begin by asking my students something banal: ‘Is it true that I am sitting on a chair?’ They are hesitant because it sounds like a trap: I am obviously sitting on a chair. I reassure them that this is not a trap – perhaps not quite true! – and to go with their pre-theoretical intuitions. Furtive nods ensue. Then I ask why; they point to the chair. So, I round up: ‘It’s true that I am sitting on a chair because I am indeed sitting on a chair; there’s an object, that makes true this sentence’. Now take the sentence, ‘Had my alarm gone off this morning I might not have woken up on time. Is that true?’ More nods. But then I point out the clinching problem. If this equally banal, subjunctive sentence is obviously true, in virtue of what is true? The other sentence was true because there was something actually here that makes it true. But in the subjunctive case, precisely because it is talking about non-actual states of affairs, there cannot, it seems, be anything that actually makes it true. And yet it clearly is; that is a problem. From this set-up it is actually very easy to demonstrate the value and explanatory power of possible worlds. Once we accept the metaphysics of modal realism, most everyday subjunctive sentences can be easily analysed to represent possible worlds in a way that is no more fancy than an empirical sentence represents a chair.

My students have, for the most part, been inaugurated and encultured within the analytic tradition of philosophy. The feminist, post-structuralist and critical theory that I also teach is very much an outlier in our curriculum. Analytic philosophy has many competing theories about how it is, if at all, that we represent the world in language; how these semantic representations are involved in knowing the world. Yet for all the sophistication and diversity of these theories, the view that when we know something, we do so just in case the representation accurately pictures some state of affairs, has not gone away.<sup>13</sup> It is there in Russell, early Wittgenstein; it is in Lewis’ modal realism. It is obviously not a new idea either. It is present, in different ways, in Plato and Aristotle, through Ockham, to Locke, Kant and even Berkeley. Propositions, or declarative sentences, can be true or false. And they are so, as Tarski schematises, in virtue of whatever our preferred metaphysical model stipulates – be that empirical sense data, mind-dependent appearances or ideas in the mind of God. Formally and technically, it is still common to think in philosophy that true semantic representations picture what they represent. The ‘common sense’ corollary is: when we speak truthfully, we say exactly how things are.<sup>14</sup>

To that end, the propositional form of the declarative sentence is still the primary medium for codifying factive, descriptive and empirical states of affairs. As such the propositional form is also the primary theoretical medium for expressing ‘how things are’ for a theory, however it is that anyone wishes to theorise this codification. This means that the teaching of feminism cannot really overcome the effects of its critical claims looking just like their counterpart propositional claims in non-critical domains. So, on the one hand, both my students and I rely on the standard norms of claiming to

teach much of the material on the curriculum, and then we have to destabilise those norms in the feminist classroom. If we do not recognise this deep discrepancy in the meaningfulness of theoretical claims being taught across different modules, and negotiate that discrepancy as part of the content of feminist criticality, it is unsurprising that students will be at a loss when trying to ‘get their heads around’ counter-hegemonic provocations.

### 2.3. Games of justification

It is worth noting that differences in norms of description become problems of justification for both student and teacher alike. When I offer justification for Lewis’ view, its strangeness is, in a strange way, no hindrance. The theoretical motivation is to describe the nature of modal reality; it does so in a way that is deeply empiricist in lineage despite its metaphysical extravagances. Possible worlds are objects, and we talk about them just as easily as we talk about chairs – chairs that we cannot see. So what needs justification is the view itself, which, as with so much analytic metaphysics, is coordinated as issues of theory choice: inference to best explanation, parsimony and so on. And even if reality turns out to be different than how it appears, it is not the appearance that is transformed, but just the explanation of the nature of things that appear as they do. This move in certain areas of philosophy is common: the explanation is surprising, but the conclusion is familiar. Indeed, analytic metaphysical views often vie for justification by retaining the familiarity of the familiar, even when the explanations become increasingly strange.

Justification becomes far more precarious when justification for the theory requires the defamiliarisation of the familiar. When I teach Wittig’s claim, I do not call upon theory choice considerations. Justification in terms of coherence, for example, is *prima facie* doomed because of its appearance as a performative contradiction. Critical feminist theories do not try to secure adherents based on the utility of theory – although they might.<sup>15</sup> They are trying to get people to understand the world in a particular way, the urgency of which cannot be met through games of theory choice. As I have discussed, however, that way is precisely not how things appear under hegemonic configurations of sociocultural states of affairs. So one thing I cannot do to justify Wittig’s claim is to simply point to the reality that the claim is nevertheless (critically) describing. I think students find this understandably odd: Wittig claims lesbians are not women. Students: but lesbians are women. Me: yes, but you have to see that the naive/hegemonic appearance that lesbians are women is false, and that lesbians are not women has critical insight. For my analytic students who are paying attention, I will be charged with begging the question at this point!

In Wittig’s claim, there is no independent process of justification which nests understanding. That is not to say that students have to agree with the claim in order to appreciate its justifiability. Or, that feminist theory does not engage in justifications. But they do have to be able to see how it could justifiably describe reality despite sociocultural reality being manifestly at odds with the description. This is not an easy task for students – or for anybody for that matter. As is well known, one way that Butler tries to justify her view in *Gender Trouble* is by way of drag, its various expressions and the various sociocultural anxieties that surround it. However, this justification is not a

simple case of pointing at drag. The performativity of gender, made visible under the subversive possibilities of drag, needs unpicking, and decoding from the ambiguities of drag; queer and resistant forms of drag need teasing apart from heteronormative masquerades which merely perform the performance of drag. As such, critical justification is perhaps better captured in the idioms of 'seeing' and 'understanding'. It is not coordinated by theories skirmishing to describe a neutral object world.

To that end, I have my students watch and critically engage with films such as *Paris is Burning* (1991) and *Tangerine* (2015). It is a standard of feminist pedagogy to have students encounter different expressions and articulations of sociocultural reality. In the case of film, for example, this allows students to see the theory being reworked through the problematics of cinematic narrativity, set-design, editing, musical semiotics and so on. In other words, seeing and understanding lives lived can re-present both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic realities in ways that are very difficult to achieve just by discussion of theory. But obviously this is not a magic solution to the problem of justification, either.

For example, I wanted my students to read Jillian Sandell's excellent analysis of the film, 'Transnational Ways of Seeing: Sexual and National Belonging in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*' (2010), alongside the film. Sandell argues that Hedwig's fractured queerness is as much a function of transnational politics as transsexuality. Not only was the Berlin Wall a marker of geopolitical division, over which communities were literally divided, but Berlin was itself mediated by America's own transnational nationhood. The divisions, clashes and cultural material that produce the biopolitical fault lines configuring cold-war Berlin serve also to configure the opportunities and foreclosures that shape the available forms of gender identity, immigration and sexual expression. Hedwig's body becomes a site of those fissures, etched out through the act of flight from Berlin. Her attempt at self-preservation in America is then played out through the dream of American pop culture, familiar from her childhood, but which was never 'her own'. When the wall went down, her body, which was already an expression of the wall's biopolitical effects, is then set adrift from both home and destination.

From the discussion of the paper, I had the impression that many of my students did not really know what to do with this analysis. They did not disagree, or think that it was unjustified, or that it failed to help us understand gender identity. Nor did it really help either. Many of them simply seemed perplexed. A plausible explanation for this confusion does not concern the quality of the analysis, its relevance or my students' ability. Rather, I suspect, for students weaned on a diet of analytic problems of self-identity over time, 'Ship of Theseus'-style paradoxes, and a priori thought-experiments, this mode of critical analysis/understanding/justification can seem very strange. To be clear as well, I do not want to suggest that this sort of activity was beyond my students. Some of them were extremely good at theory, exploring its mediations in critical readings of sociocultural phenomena – some had been waiting for this course throughout their entire degree. I hope also that all my students found something new and interesting in these different ways to do theory. The point is that the circumstantial challenges of teaching feminism can be acute, however. Moreover, it is not the right answer to drop this kind of analysis from the course. I do not think you can do feminist theory, and thereby learn

about it, without this kind of critical hermeneutic work. So, to the extent that critical feminist theory gets a place at the table of mainstream curricula, these tensions and pressures need acknowledging. This module has since been dropped. However, if I have the opportunity to teach it again, or something like it, I think that these problems – how theory does, both in terms of claiming and justifying – are issues I would broach explicitly, and at the outset of the course.

### 3. Teaching feminism, certainty and existential jeopardies

[H]ow stories that you are told for your own enjoyment narrow down what is possible, especially, but not only, for girls. Sara Ahmed

The discussion so far revolves around how critical feminist claims confound precisely because they are attempting to re-present sociocultural reality away from the distorted self-representations of hegemony itself. The way I have analysed these problems, so far, revolves around forms of theoretical claims and the intelligibility of claims given wider educational contexts. These are, in a sense, somewhat narrow, technical issues about epistemology, and their effects in my experience of teaching feminism. I now want to turn my attention to a much wider issue, one that has been hinted at in the discussion so far, but which needs focus and elaboration. I have focused on situations where students do not ‘get’ the theory claim at all, or are deeply hostile to it. One aspect of this confusion concerns the intelligibility of the claims, and the critical practices of ‘justification’. However, perhaps the deeper story about this confusion concerns the conditions for the possibility of intelligibility as such. Some students do not ‘see’ what feminist claims are getting at precisely because some critical claim is a challenge to the life-world in which they make sense of themselves, and the world around them. It is not merely that the claim does not seem to describe the world, it is the fact that it is at odds with the sociocultural conditions of possibility for description. In other words, critical feminist claims challenge student certainty, to use the Wittgensteinian term. In this section, I explore the way that critical claims clash with (hegemonic) forms of life, and thereby the conditions for the possibility of knowledge production within those frames. I reflect on the effects of this challenge to certainty, and the problems that this poses to us as teachers of feminism.

#### 3.1. Devil’s advocate

When teaching Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, one of my students responded, with some irritation, that this was all just ‘anti-scientific’. I asked him what he meant by this, and he responded that the theory contravened scientific fact. I asked him, “Could you give me examples?” Perhaps the most standard pre-theoretical view about gender inflected with the almost equally familiar stamp of ‘Science’. Given the level of student resistance to Butler’s position, I wanted to approach the situation more on his terms, in order to jostle loose some possibility of seeing things differently. I pointed out that these did not sound much like scientific facts to me. If scientific facts are anything at all, they are surely precise, technical and dependent on theory context for their meaning and intelligibility. To be scientific surely we would need biological detail, for example. We would need something on what ‘males’ and ‘females’ are. And then we’d need some (scientific?)

theory that brings together this 'biological' description with gender terms. As expected, he wanted to draw upon chromosomal and hormonal detail. These are the scientific facts, and we can read off the generalist facts from these specifics. I encouraged him to look up some of these facts. He quickly found out that the science is more complicated than he had imagined: chromosomal profiles are not the binary affairs he expected; hormonal profiles don't map between sex and gender in the way that he had assumed. Indeed, there are even counter-hegemonic 'scientific facts' about sex and gender as we find in the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling.<sup>16</sup> As such, science too is a much more complicated arena of theory and discourse than is often assumed. I then ran Butler's own argument: if we are supposed to be reading off 'sex' and thereby 'gender' from natural facts, and the natural facts turn out not to fit our expectations, we had better not be using sociocultural sex and gender norms to normalise the 'natural' facts. To do so is plainly circular. Her point is well known, there were no natural facts prior to gender in the first place; 'sex' is already a function of 'gender' talk.

His response was not further argument, but a kind of confused, irritated silence. After the seminar, he approached me: 'You were just playing devil's advocate, right?' We discussed the issue further. When he realised that I took Butler's position and argument seriously, he left deeply unhappy. I have played over this conversation a number of times. What did he want, and expect of me with the comment about devil's advocate? On the one hand, I think he found it very difficult to reconcile the idea that a teacher, someone he had shown some respect for in the past, could hold a view so manifestly wrong. More than this, I think he was hoping I was going to drop the game, and explain to him what was really wrong with Butler's view. What he needed was help: not just some extra tutoring, but support. He was certain Butler was wrong. Indeed she had to be; just as for some students, she must be right. But it was also somewhat clear to him that he did not have reasons-to-hand as to why it was wrong. He was hoping that I, as the teacher, did. I would explain; then it would all make sense again, and he would have been right all along.

No student has ever come up to me to seek reassurance over the structure and nature of modal reality. Students come to favour views about modality; they will argue about them, maybe even vehemently and passionately. But no student I have come across needs Lewis to be wrong. No matter whether or not a student agrees with Lewis, they could live with him being either right or wrong. Some views have the luxury of simply being right or wrong. Other views are such that students rhetorically situate them as the devil's work, and the academics who write them have effigies of themselves burnt by crowds of demonstrators.<sup>17</sup> Why is that?

### 3.2. Feminist claims, hegemonic descriptions and certainty

The answer is obviously enormously complex. But part of the answer, I think, lies at the hidden heart of epistemology. Many of us are, in a myriad of different ways (psychically, economically, politically, etc.), invested in the maintenance of the hegemonic status quo. Moreover, these investments are not merely acquired epistemic commitments, indexed to beliefs about the world that we take to be true, but are constitutive, existential commitments out of which sociocultural forms of living are

constituted. Hegemony is the dominant form of living in existential and political terms. In terms of the intelligibility of the sociocultural world and descriptions of it, one way that hegemonic dominance is expressed is by determining the scope of possible sociocultural descriptions. Moreover, having outlined what can and cannot be intelligibly said, the possibility of description maps, in advance, to the sociocultural configurations of hegemony. Feminist claims may contest descriptions that society is this way or that. However, feminism very often contests hegemony at a deeper, more fundamental level: at the very level of the frame of descriptive intelligibility as such. By extension, to the extent that feminist theory claims challenge hegemonic certainties, hegemony must preclude those claims as alternate, possible frames for understanding the world. Therefore, what counts as a description within a frame of intelligibility, and what counts as part of the frame, becomes a contest for control of epistemology, and for the possibility of discourse as such. This contest has immediate, and profound, effects for students learning feminist theory. It is one thing to take an epistemic risk on some description being true or false. It is quite another to have to entertain a claim which implicates all that you take certain about yourself, and the sociocultural world which frames the sense that the world has. This is the existential risk, as it were, that counter-hegemonic feminist claims involve.

To more fully explore this existential dimension of teaching critical feminist claims, I think it is very useful to reflect on Wittgensteinian accounts of the epistemology of certainty. Wittgenstein argued that not all propositions that appear to describe the world are so. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein argues that some seemingly empirical propositions frame knowledge-making practices. These framing – or hinge propositions – are in fact certainties. Certainties appear in form and content to be empirical propositions, and thereby justifiable empirically: we want to evaluate them by looking at the world, as it were, and seeing if they accurately represent it. However, Wittgenstein argues that certainties frame the intelligibility of the empirical world (1969, §358). Certainties constitute the forms of living, and the conditions of intelligibility for an empirical proposition; hinge propositions delimit the domain of the empirical, and the game of empirical justification within which epistemology standardly takes place (§162). As a result, certainties determine the scope of epistemic possibility for any empirical proposition: it is possible, in terms of a posteriori enquiry, that it is not raining; so the proposition that it is raining is empirical. However, it is not possible, in the relevant epistemic sense, that I can stand on the sun and so this proposition is a certainty that frames the intelligibility of other empirical propositions (§117). We do not do empirical research to find out if I have told the truth about not having stood on the sun; the claim that ‘I have not stood on the sun’ is the gratuitous expression that I can coordinate myself, practically and communicatively, within the particular ‘life-world’ in which I live. Indeed, we can identify a certainty if its articulation is met with confusion rather than empirical inquiry.

I have suggested that feminist claims seem to describe the world, just as certainties do. But we can see that in both cases, the norms that govern both feminist claims and certainties are radically different to the epistemic norms that standardly govern and coordinate describing claims such as ‘it is raining’. What I now want to explore is the idea that critical feminist claims contest hegemonic certainties for the majority of people within dominant forms of living. But what the feminist is trying to do is wrest that

certainty out of its framing role and into a position of epistemic contestability without it thereby just becoming an empirical claim in the process. Hence feminist claims are simultaneously hegemonic certainties for some, and for critical feminists radical modes of description that destabilise certainties, and the empirical configurations of the world made possible by those certainties.<sup>18</sup> The critical claims of feminist theories therefore run a tightrope through the standard epistemic structures and norms which we standardly deploy to describe and understand the world around us.

Feminist claims are existential: they implicate, contest and configure the meaningfulness for living in any particular life-world. It seems plausible that they therefore take aim at Wittgenstein's certainties while operating within the domain of what is usually/hegemonically taken to be empirical, for example, gender, class, race and so on. In a hegemonic distribution of the empirical and the certain, the proposition 'I know that he is a man' is empirical, and 'there are two sexes' is a certainty. Without Wittgenstein's insight, the latter proposition is standardly treated as empirical while occupying the space of certainty. That is, the proposition is treated as though empirical, and thereby able to be either true or false, while its truth is taken to be obvious beyond empirical doubt. If hegemony determines both the frame within which lives are made intelligible, as well as the form and content of empirical material out of which possible descriptions of the world are composed, then hegemony takes on the aura of inevitability.

I am inclined to think that Wittgenstein is right that certainties frame the possibility of intelligibility and epistemology as such. The issue of certainty is therefore a deep problem for feminist theory: feminism wants to take as contingent, and contest, what hegemony takes as certain. But given that certainty is the frame in which such contestations take place, feminist theory is always already undermined by hegemonic certainty. In my view, no critique, feminist or otherwise, can ever drill all the way through a form of life. Call this the existential limitations of critique. However, even as feminism is itself existentially situated and limited – which is another way of saying that critique is always nested within a form of life, and never a critical view from nowhere<sup>19</sup> – it takes aim at the forms of life which sustain its own possibility.<sup>20</sup> In part this is achieved by rethinking at least some of the sedimented certainties of sociocultural material. Indeed, Wittgenstein points out that forms of life are always in processes of (slow) change (§97). He provides us with the appropriately conservative image of a riverbed undergoing gentle erosions and reconstitutions; change in forms of life as functional effects of lives being lived collectively. Contrary to this image of ecological conservatism, feminism is radical: it is always an untimely intervention into forms of living<sup>21</sup>; it is a drill upon the bed of certainty.

As such, feminist claims are literally and figuratively, epistemically and existentially disturbing. Take the hegemonic certainty that 'there are two sexes'. What are the consequences of reading this claim critically rather something empirical or certain? Basically, it involves reading it as both hegemonically true, but where that truth is an index of hegemonic distortion. Butler knows that it is taken to be a hegemonic certainty, but rather than asking a naive empirical question: true in virtue of what; she asks how is it true? It is not true on some normatively neutral, naturalistic/empirical basis; rather, the way this claim is true is according to the configurations of sociocultural and historical

phenomena that underwrite the form of the hegemonic life-world. She now has the material to tease out dialectical contradiction: the veneer of natural fact upon which the proposition is supposedly based becomes an index of its falsity also. It is true that 'there are two sexes', but not because of the fact of two sexes, but because hegemonic reality is configured such that 'there are two sexes'. Hence Butler's crucial insight over the dangerous precarity of hegemonic certainty: the very place that hegemony wants us to look for supposedly normatively neutral 'facts about sex', that is, the material world, is the very place hegemony cannot afford for us to look without drawing attention to its own normative biases.

### 3.3. Student certainty ( . . . and students' boyfriends' certainty)

This analysis of the relationship of feminist claims to hegemonic certainties and 'facts' has useful implications for better understanding the complexities that surround teaching feminist theory. On the one hand, it helps us to better understand the dynamics and consequences of the analysis of section 2. In his memorable example of teaching the child, Wittgenstein points out that when teaching children, often they are not given reasons (§374). 'This is a "table"'. 'Why?' asks the child. Wittgenstein reminds us of the adult response: 'There is no "why"; I am telling you that "this is a table"'. The adult is not reasoning with the child, she is inaugurating the child into a form of life; telling her how things are. 'This is a boy. You are not a boy; you are a girl'. 'Why?' Because, ultimately, that is how things are. Whatever reasons are given along the way, they will bottom out somewhere in the certainties which always, and already, delimit 'how things are'. There is nothing to say about those certainties other than to inhabit them; there are no reasons hiding behind them. What Wittig's provocative claim does is reconfigure the naturalistic rhetoric of 'how things are'. She reminds us that what the adult really means is: 'this is how things are for us' where 'us' stands for the unspoken standpoint of the hegemonic majority. Hiding hegemonic certainty under the guise of 'naturalistic fact' is where the distortions of heteronormativity reside. As such, the justification of critical claims discussed above becomes a problem of wrestling with sociocultural certainty. It is a way of showing and analysing the social world in a way that it is both familiar, and yet resistant to hegemony's own self-marketed image as both given naturally, and necessary. These problems of certainty are problems for students both inside and outside the classroom.

For the sceptical student, what they take as a certainty is 'out of play' from an epistemic point of view. Even saying 'I know that I am a man' is already too much (§538). As Wittgenstein points out, to say that I know that p, is to entertain the possibility of being able to be wrong about p. If, however, I do not even know how I could be wrong about p, then I am certain of it. I think this helps explain the impasse that I reached with my student over Butler. This is simultaneously the deeper implication of standpoint epistemology: standpoints are functions of positions in forms of living relative to hegemony. While the standpoints of marginalised communities may emerge from within the sprawl of hegemonic cultures, those that are still positioned differently to those who more or less live hegemonic lives. For the distribution of facts and certainties, 'gender' and 'sex' as such are not even supposed to be 'knowledge'; we should not be talking about them in epistemic terms; they are givens. To the extent that we engage with them



at all, we do so on the basis that they are demonstrably supported by scientific fact – where this idealised ‘science’ trumps all other modes of description available. My attempt to reason with him involves treating ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as knowledge, and therefore, as contestable; this is precisely what ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ is not for him, given the way that he has been encultured to understand himself and the world around him.

I think if I could try again, it would be to articulate the certainty of the certainty, and work from there. Acknowledging certainty, acknowledging that we are all certain of some things and acknowledging that it is scary for any of us to question that of which we are certain, might have been a better place to start. Moving forward, however, there can be no magic formula for how to teach feminism in this situation. There can be no general method because the way in which individual students experience, and inhabit the world in which they live, will particularise the conditions under which the certainty of certainties can be suspended. How a certainty may be revealed as such – and thereby as a contingent frame for a form of life – will very much depend on the student, and how their own particular circumstances situate the membrane that separates the empirical from the certain. Their specific experiences will determine how hegemonic reality will appear as either certain or contestable; these specifics will further determine whether there are some particular certainties that could be jostled loose from their sedimentations as certainty into contestable discussion. Indeed, it is also possible that for some students, the life-world constituting ‘facts’ of hegemony are, and will remain, certain. Whatever happens, contesting certainties, as feminist theories do, involves serious existential jeopardy for students.

Yet, as a final point, all of this discussion has so far discussed student experience as something that they do by themselves, and for themselves. This is obviously not the case. The very issue of certainties as indices of forms of living already expresses the immanence of a wider sociocultural frame for individual experience. Checking in with students about their reading, one student was frowning. Butler again ( . . . I do teach other things on this course, by the way, but it is Butler that frustrates the most)! Her boyfriend was complaining about the hubris of academics who talk about people in ways that they themselves cannot understand. He had concluded from this that Butler must be talking nonsense. I pointed out that scientists talk about us, and about the world around us, in technical ways that we, as lay people, might not understand. But we do not take that as a measure of the truth of what they say. I was aware though that this is not what the student’s boyfriend was getting at. He was voicing similar frustrations to my own student above. The point of this final anecdote is to acknowledge the pressure that students feel both from within the classroom and from outside of it – pressures which squeeze from both directions as it were. Students have to negotiate not only the existential disturbances of learning feminist theory, but also how those disturbances tremor beyond the classroom. These may be shocks felt in their personal relationships with friends, partners and family. Indeed, this is a hegemonic beyond which most likely undervalues, resists and undermines their experiences within the feminist classroom.

#### 4. Concluding remarks


I have discussed at some length how teaching feminism is involved in the problematics of critically describing sociocultural states of affairs. The criticality of feminist claims means that they describe in ways that are often confusing for students; justification involves further exploration and theorising of these descriptions. As such, justification can emphasise rather than relieve the pressures felt due to the difficulties of theory. These issues are rendered even more complex by the fact that feminism is often attacking certainties about the world. Yet these are never abstract problems but problems in the classroom: they are problems mediated by a student's learning experience, sociocultural context, curriculum design and how feminist modules are situated alongside other areas of study.

Reflecting on my experiences, and in the writing of this article, I am increasingly convinced that acknowledging the practice of feminist theory, and how it radically transforms the practice of learning, is crucial content in a feminist class. Moreover, that depending on the context of feminist theory module in a curriculum, the problem of educational context will be more or less acute. Regardless, I think that my exploration of these issues has far-reaching implications in a liberal educational context. Where knowledge and knowledge-making practices are seen as homogenous, enjoying equitability across domains of study, feminist theory modules will not slot so easily into curricula. Nor is it so easy to fit some critical feminist theory into a module. Of course, I am not suggesting that by that feminist theory and modules get left out. Rather, that the depth of their challenge be appreciated, and that there is substantial curriculum commitment to feminism, and the challenges it poses to students beyond the feminist module and its classroom.

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## Notes

1. All three quotations from Sara Ahmed (2017). <https://www.guernicamag.com/sara-ahmed-the-personal-is-institutional/>.
2. I take an intentionally broad focus as regards 'critical feminist philosophy/theory'. What 'feminist' 'philosophy' might be – its methods and practices – is itself an issue of feminism. See, for example, Brown (2005, §6) and Diprose (2000). What I have in mind by talking about critical feminism is any feminism that counts as critical theory, broadly constructed. That might be operating with a methodology of 'critique' such as in the work of Wendy Brown, see especially Brown (2005, §1; 2006, 4–5). Furthermore, there are other feminist theorists whose work is clearly critical in some relevant sense. See, for example, the likes of Butler (2006), Mohanty (1988), through Spivak (1998), to name but a few. That said, I appreciate that the tendency for criticality has been critiqued by other feminists – see

Sedgwick's powerful reappraisal of (paranoid) 'critique' (2003, 144).

3. Lewis (1986, 133); Butler (2006, 10–22).
4. Leibniz is the historical inspiration by arguing that our world was the best of all possible worlds (2007, 130).
5. The theories I develop here may seem reminiscent of contemporary Threshold Concept theory. Without going into detail about this, I am broadly sympathetic to the ideas of transformation and difficulty in this theory. However, there are commitments about concepts, discipline structures and a general view of epistemology that I find less convincing. As such, the analysis here, I think, stands very much apart from this pedagogy in important respects. See Meyer and Land (2005).
6. Standpoint epistemology is a rich trajectory in feminist thinking, and has been crucial to the development and ongoing challenges that women, and other marginalised groups, can levy towards hegemonic epistemologies and their effects. For this section, I am drawing upon these writers as exemplar in this development while acknowledging that this is a sample. See Hill Collins' (2000, 268) classic analysis of the epistemic status of racialised subjects; Harding (1987, 7–10) on standpoint epistemology in the sciences and social sciences; Hartsock (1987, 159–64) on the nature of a standpoint. I share Paul Gilroy's concerns that standpoint epistemology runs the danger of replicating the reification and idealisation of subjects and associated knowledges (2002, 53). That said, now is not the place to adjudicate over these issues. Moreover, to the extent that standpoint epistemology is relevant to this article, I think that such epistemologies are crucial.
7. This is notwithstanding postcolonial critiques of who gets to decide what knowledge is, how it is produced and what it looks like. See Quijano (2007, 169); Cf. also Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 110–12). This also concerns hegemonic expressions and language which control and determine the intelligibility of epistemic agents – see Oye'wu'm i (2004, 5–7).
8. See, for example, Dalmiya and Alcoff (1993, 221) for ways propositional knowledge is privileged over other modalities of knowing, and how that privileges certain activities and knowers while marginalising others.
9. In this article, I am drawing upon the tradition of critical pedagogy, growing out of the work of Freire (2005), through Giroux (1997, 2011) and Lombardo (2004). I have been particularly influenced by the critical reception and mediation of critical pedagogy in the work of bell hooks' feminist pedagogy (1994, 2010).
10. See, for example, Mary Brown and Suzanne De Castell (1993) for one of the first papers to explore the relationship between queer theory and pedagogy; Shireen Keyl (2017) for a critical analysis and development of pedagogical theory through the lens of subaltern theory.

11. Of course the notion of hegemony is complex and contested; here, I adopt something like the view espoused by Laclau (2000, 44–58) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 7–8). Hegemony refers to the dominant, normative framework which configures the apparatuses of power that constitute some society.
12. See Zerilli (2005) for further discussion of the complexities of political imagination and feminist thinking.
13. See Russell (1951, 127–29) for a classic view of a fact; and Kirkham (2001, 121–22). Of course there are other models of the fact – Tractarian, for example. Rather than any particular theory, I am implicitly working with some broad kind of isomorphic, correspondence between what is said and how things are.
14. I think as well that these issues of isomorphism and correspondence are somewhat fancy ways of talking about ideas that underwrite common sense and pre-theoretical views of truth. As such, this ‘saying how things are’ is powerful in and outside the classroom – see hooks (2010, 49–50). It is also worth noting that the facts of a theory, is often what is ‘banked’ as knowledge, see Freire (2005, 72); and what Dewey (1997, 17) critiques in the transference theories of education. Needless to say that feminist theories have been traditionally wary of facts, correspondence, naive realist truths and their roles in propositional knowledge. Even in theories sympathetic to analytic philosophy, there is often a push away from these semantic, epistemic and metaphysical commitments; see, for example, Alcoff (1996) and Haslanger (2012). For contrast, see Boghossian (2006, 717) for a deeply uncritical repetition of correspondence about truth and justification in an educational context. He does not even acknowledge that there are other realisms than the rough epistemic realism he sketches in this paper. I have not touched upon Mohanty’s (1990) excellent analysis of liberal epistemic practices and their implications for teaching: how facts about ‘the world out there’ tend to excuse the knower from their involvement in those ‘facts’ (p. 194), and how epistemic agency as such is also structured in an atomistic, individualistic way (p. 199). I take it my analysis is at least consistent with these key insights.
15. I am grateful for Jana Cattien for pointing this out to me. Butler’s performativity theory of gender may well be compelling for theory choice issues. While divisive and confounding to some, for many it has extraordinary explanatory power.
16. See Fausto-Sterling (1985, §§3 and 7).
17. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/judith-butler-discusses-being-burned-effigy-and-protested-brazil>.
18. For a relevant, critical discussion of certainty and feminist foundations, see Zerilli (2005, §1).
19. See Mahmood (2013); Adorno (2004, 237); Brown (2013).

20. See Marasco (2006, 110) and Brown (2006, 4–5) on feminist critique and its own destabilising effects for feminism.
21. See Brown (2005, §1).

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